



Czech Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 30,442 square miles, and its population is estimated at 10.2 million. The country has a largely homogenous population with a dominant Christian tradition. However, in part as a result of 40 years of Communist rule between 1948 and 1989, the vast majority of citizens do not identify themselves as members of any organized religion. In a 2004 opinion poll, 32 percent of respondents claimed to believe in God, while 49 percent identified themselves as atheists. There was a revival of interest in religion after the 1989 "Velvet Revolution"; however, the number of those professing religious beliefs or participating in organized religion has fallen steadily since then in almost every region of the country.

An estimated 5 percent of the population attends Catholic services weekly. Most live in the southern Moravian dioceses of Olomouc and Brno. The number of practicing Protestants is even lower (approximately 1 percent of the population). Leaders of the local Muslim community estimate that there are 20,000 to 30,000 Muslims; Islam was registered as an officially recognized religion in 2004. There is a mosque in Brno and another in Prague. The Jewish community, which numbers only a few thousand persons, is an officially registered religion because of its recognition by the State before 1989.

Missionaries of various religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses, are present in the country. Missionaries of various religions generally proselytize without hindrance.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Religious affairs are the responsibility of the Department of Churches at the Ministry of Culture. All religious groups officially registered with the Ministry of Culture are eligible to receive subsidies from the State, although some decline to receive state financial support as a matter of principle and as an expression of their independence. There are 26 state-recognized religious organizations. In 2004, the Center of Muslim Communities was officially registered, the first such registration for a Muslim organization in the country. The Jewish Center Chai, which applied for registration last year, was denied because its application did not meet the appropriate legal conditions. The Center did not have the requisite number of signatures, and it came to light that some signatures were falsely placed on the document. The citizens involved are considering legal action against the Center. An appeal by the Unification Church to overturn their denial to register in 1999 was denied by the Constitutional Court in 2004.

The 2002 law on "Religious Freedom and the Position of Churches and Religious Associations" created a two-tiered system of registration for religious organizations. To register at the first (lowest) tier, a religious group must have at least 300 adult members permanently residing in the country. First-tier registration conveys limited tax benefits and imposes annual reporting

requirements, as well as a 10-year waiting period before the organization may apply for full second-tier registration. To register at the second tier, a religious group must have membership equal to at least 0.1 percent of the country's population (approximately 10,000 persons) and have been registered in the first tier for at least 10 years. Second-tier registration entitles the organization to a share of state funding. Only clergy of registered second-tier organizations may perform officially recognized marriage ceremonies and serve as chaplains in the military and prisons, although prisoners of other faiths may receive visits from their respective clergy. Religious groups registered prior to 1989, such as the small Jewish community, are not required to meet these conditions for registration. Unregistered religious groups may not legally own community property but often form civic-interest associations for the purpose of managing their property and other holdings until they are able to meet the qualifications for registration. The Government does not interfere with or prevent this type of interim solution. Unregistered religious groups otherwise are free to assemble and worship in the manner of their choice.

Religious organizations receive approximately \$117 million (3 billion Czech crowns) annually from the Government. Funds are divided proportionally among the 21 religious organizations eligible for state assistance based on the number of clergy in each, with the exception of 4 religious organizations (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, the New Apostolic Church, and Open Brethren) that do not accept state funding. Of this sum, approximately \$32 million (818 million Czech crowns) is used to pay salaries to clergymen. The rest of the funding goes to state grants for religious organizations' medical, charitable, and educational activities, as well as for the maintenance of religious memorials and buildings.

A 2000 law outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of 6 months to 3 years for public denial, questioning, or approval of, or attempts to justify the Nazi genocide. The law also outlaws the incitement of hatred based on religion.

Missionaries must obtain a long-term residence and work permit if they intend to remain longer than 90 days. There were no reports of delays in processing visas for missionaries during the period covered by this report. There is no special visa category for religious workers; foreign missionaries and clergy are required to meet the relatively stringent conditions for a standard work permit even if their activity is strictly ecclesiastical or voluntary in nature.

Religion is not taught in public schools, although a few private religious schools exist. Religious broadcasters are free to operate without hindrance from the Government or other parties.

The Government continued its effort to resolve religious-based communal and personal property restitution problems, especially with regard to Jewish property. Jewish claims date to the period of the Nazi occupation, while Catholic authorities are pressing claims for properties that were seized under the former Communist regime. While Jewish property claims have been largely resolved, there was no progress in resolving the Catholic Church's claims during the period covered by this report.

The 1991 Law on Restitution applied only to property seized after the Communists took power in 1948. In 1994, the Parliament amended the law to provide for restitution of or compensation for property wrongfully seized between 1938 and 1945. This amendment provided for the inclusion of Jewish private properties, primarily buildings, seized by the Nazi regime. In 1994, the Federation of Jewish Communities identified 202 communal properties as its highest priorities for restitution, although it had unresolved claims for more than 1,000 properties. By decree, the Government returned most of the properties in its possession, as did the city of Prague; however, despite a government appeal, other cities have not been as responsive. A few outstanding cases remain, including two properties in Brno that are under the control of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. A 2000 law authorized the Government to return more than 60 works of art in the National Gallery to the Jewish community and an estimated 7,000 works of art in the Government's possession to individual Jewish citizens and their descendants. Another provision of the law authorized the return of certain agricultural property in the Government's possession to its original owners.

A government compensation fund of approximately \$11.7 million (300 million Czech crowns) created to pay for those properties that cannot be restituted physically began operating in 2001 under the control of an independent board. It is expected to provide partial compensation in cases where the Government needs to retain the property or is no longer in possession of it, to help meet the social needs of poor Jewish communities, and to support the restoration of synagogues and cemeteries. Approximately two-thirds of the funds are to be dedicated to communal property and one-third to individual claims. Applications for the fund were accepted in 2001.

Certain properties of religious orders, including 175 monasteries and other institutions, were restituted under laws passed in 1990 and 1991. The Catholic Church still claims some 175,000 hectares of "income-generating properties." Many of these properties are vast tracts of farm and woodland that are now in the hands of municipal governments or private owners. These current owners claim that the Catholic Church was granted the use of the properties under the Hapsburg empire but that the Church was never the owner of the properties in question and that the Government owes the Church no duty of restitution. When the Social Democratic government came to power in 1998, it halted further restitution of non-Jewish religious communal property, including a decision of the previous government to return 1,068,000 hectares of land and some 700 buildings to the Catholic Church. Efforts to resolve the final claims continue but have been slowed by the Church's refusal to provide a list of specific properties and land to which it feels entitled, and the Government's refusal to continue restitution discussions without this list. There was no progress in resolving the Catholic Church's claims during the period covered by this report.

Members of unregistered religious groups may issue publications without interference.

The Ministry of Culture sponsors religiously oriented cultural activities through a grant program. The Ministry sponsored some

inter-faith activities during the period covered by this report, including partial funding of the Christian and Jewish Society.

Easter Monday, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day (December 26) are recognized as national holidays, although their recognition does not negatively affect any religious group.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Under the 2002 religious registration law, the Ministry of Culture has responsibility for registering religious charities and enterprises as legal entities. The Catholic Church has criticized the law on the grounds that it unduly restricts the manner in which the Church manages and finances many of its social projects. An October 2003 Constitutional Court ruling that the Ministry of Culture improperly interpreted the registration law in failing to register a religious enterprise operated by the Catholic Church in the northern Moravian town of Lipnik nad Bečvou was implemented by the Ministry in 2003 and the enterprise in question was registered. The Catholic Church reported that religious charities and enterprises continue to experience difficulties and delays in registering as legal entities, although there has been some recent improvement in the speed of granting registrations.

Several unregistered religious groups, including the Church of Scientology, have criticized the 2002 law on registration of religious groups because they believe that it is prejudicial against smaller religious groups.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reports of abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2002, the Parliament passed a measure to extend the deadline for filing art restitution claims by Holocaust victims to December 31, 2006. In February 2004, Parliament approved a law designating January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day in the country.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The immigrant population is still relatively small and includes persons from Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, and Greece. Immigrants have not reported any difficulties in practicing their respective faiths.

Plans to build a mosque in the northern Bohemian town of Teplice were withdrawn in 2004 because of protests from the town's residents. A petition against the mosque, noting recent incidents of Arab terrorism, garnered 4,500 signatures from a population of 53,000. Teplice is popular among Arab tourists for its medicinal spas; in 2003, the town had approximately 2,850 visitors from Arab countries.

A small but persistent and fairly well-organized extreme right-wing movement with anti-Semitic views exists in the country. The Ministry of Interior continued its efforts to counter the neo-Nazis, which included monitoring of their activities, close cooperation with police units in neighboring countries, and concentrated efforts to shut down unauthorized concerts and gatherings of neo-Nazi groups. In August 2004, approximately 80 tombstones were found toppled by unknown vandals at a Jewish cemetery in the eastern town of Hranice. In October 2004, vandals damaged a memorial to victims of the Holocaust for the second time since it was erected three months earlier in the town of Bohumin. In April 2005, Denis Gerasimov, member of the Russian Neo-Nazi band Kolovkrat, was acquitted of charges of promotion of Nazism and Neo-Nazism by the Prague Sixth District Court. Police had arrested Gerasimov and charged him with supporting and propagating a movement aimed at suppressing human rights. Gerasimov was detained at Prague's Ruzyně International Airport after police found large amounts of Nazi propaganda in his luggage. Gerasimov's band performed at a skinhead meeting in east Bohemia in January 2004. In March 2005, several hundred Neo-Nazis from the country and neighboring countries staged a concert in a Czech town; the concert led to calls for a police crackdown, but police stated that they could not intervene as it was a private event where no breach of the law was committed. In 2000, Michal Zitko was arrested on charges of slandering a race, nation, or belief for publishing an edition of Hitler's book "Mein Kampf." In January 2004, the Prague Municipal Court re-imposed a previously overturned 3-year sentence on Michal Zitko

for supporting a movement aimed at suppressing human rights, but in March 2005, Zitko was acquitted by the Supreme Court. The Court did not find that by publishing the book Zitko was "supporting a movement "aimed at suppressing human rights.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialogue and policy of promoting human rights. U.S. Government efforts on religious issues have focused largely on encouraging the Government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims and registration of religious organizations.

During the period covered by this report, U.S. Government and Embassy officials emphasized to the Government and religious groups the importance of restitution (or fair and adequate compensation when return is no longer possible) in cases pending from property wrongfully taken from Holocaust victims, the Jewish community, and churches.

The Embassy maintains close contact with the Office of the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, representatives of various religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations. Embassy officials met on several occasions with representatives of the Ministry of Culture to discuss the law on religious registration, as well as representatives of smaller religious groups affected by the law, including the Czech Muslim community. Several meetings were held with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Federation of Jewish Communities on restitution issues. Embassy officials also responded to individual requests for assistance from Czech-American Holocaust victims seeking compensation.

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